Spotted Owl Declared Endangered In Washington

BY JANET O'MARA AND HARRIET ALLEN

On January 15, 1988, the Washington Wildlife Commission classified the northern spotted owl as an "endangered species" in Washington.

The decision was reached after years of meticulous research by the Department of Wildlife, headed by Biologist Harriet Allen, and after seven hours of testimony and discussion at the meeting itself.

Allen has been involved with spotted owl research for six years now, first as a field biologist and now as lead biologist for the department's spotted owl research efforts. "The commission's decision was very gratifying for all of us," she says.

The Wildlife Commission also directed the department to involve various interested groups in the development of a management/recovery plan to be presented to the commission within six months. Public meetings already have been held to collect various interest groups' concerns.

The struggle is not over for the northern spotted owl, or for the old-growth habitat it prefers, however. The designation by the Wildlife Commission is only a beginning. It does not mean that cutting of spotted owl habitat can be immediately or solely regulated by the department. It does *not* mean that spotted owl populations are immediately going to stop their decline.

It also does *not* mean, as some people fear, that recreational access will be restricted or that hunting opportunities will decrease. Just the opposite is often true, because, for example, elk also thrive in the same areas as spotted owls.

The designation of "endangered," therefore, is only one tool, but an important one. Killing or harassing a spotted owl is now a gross misdemeanor. Land managers will now be forced to more seriously consider the survival of the owl and its habitat when making environmental impact decisions. And it gives the Department of Wildlife more reason to work for the protection and recovery of the owl.

Owls and Old-growth

The northern spotted owl is a medium-sized forest owl that is distinguished by its dark brown eyes, rounded head and mottled brown and white pattern. It ranges from southern British Columbia through northern California. In Washington, it's found on the east and west slopes of the Cascades and the Olympic Peninsula. Of the three states where it occurs, the spotted owl is in the most severe trouble here in Washington.

The bird is usually found in low elevation, old-growth and mature coniferous forests. It nests in cavities in large old trees, mistletoe platforms and other birds' abandoned stick nests. Tall, dense old-growth is multi-level, providing protection for the temperature-sensitive owl from heat in the summer and cold in the winter. The abundant dead and down material provides good habitat for its main prey, the northern flying squirrel.

The forest itself provides the spotted owl protection from its main predator, the great horned owl, since that much larger owl prefers open areas and forest edges.

Just as importantly, the spotted owl is an "indicator species" used to monitor the health of old-growth forests and the many other species which live in that habitat.

Washington has an estimated 500-600 pairs of owls, about 1/3 to 1/2 of what Oregon has (1200 to 1500 pairs). There are about 100 pairs on the Olympic Peninsula, 300 in the Cascades and possibly 100-150 in the eastern Cascades. In Oregon, there may be as many as ten pairs per township. In Washington, the most per township is four pairs.

Biologists are alarmed at the owl's low reproduction in Washington. In a study by the department and the U.S. Forest Service, 46 spotted owl habitat areas were monitored for three years, ending in 1986. During that time, only four pairs reproduced, once each. The Forest Service also monitored 59 sites in the Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest in 1987 and found no reproduction. Only three successful nests were

found on the entire Olympic Peninsula in 1987.

The outright loss of old-growth habitat and the fragmentation and isolation of those stands that remain as "islands" form the single biggest threat to the continued existence of the spotted owl in Washington. The break-up of the old-growth forest reduces the amount of cover and hunting territory, and forces adult and juvenile spotted owls to cross open areas where they become vulnerable to predation. Juvenile birds are suffering particularly high mortality. Studies reveal that 80-90 percent of dispersing young do not survive their first year. Both starvation and predation are the major causes of these deaths. Young spotted owls often starve to death during dispersal because they cannot find adequate old-growth habitat and its food resources.

Obviously, northern spotted owls are in trouble in Washington. On a large scale, the Olympic and Cascade populations have been isolated by an ever-widening gulf of lost habitat. Without a bridge for the dispersion of birds from one group to the other, the Olympic population, in particular, faces great risk of extinction. The urgency of the northern spotted owl's struggle to survive cannot be understated. The population continues to decline. And the spotted owl's home—old-growth forest, irreplaceable at any price – is rapidly disappearing. ww

***Below:** Northern spotted owl (*Strix occidentalis*) is only one of many organisms within the old-growth forest ecosystem. Washington spotted owl populations decline as this critical habitat shrinks.* KEN BEVIS